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SUBJECT: THE DPRK LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION: ROK OBSERVERS
DIVIDED ON WHO WILL SUCCEED KIM JONG-IL, WHEN HE WILL DO IT

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) ROK academics interviewed in recent weeks by poloff were divided on whether North Korean leader Kim Jong-il would name his successor in the near future, and on whether Kim would choose one of his sons as his heir or seek outside the Kim family. Most believed Kim Jong-il's second son, Kim Jong-chul, was the most likely heir, although one scholar asserted that third son Kim Jong-un was his father's favorite. Others argued, however, that Kim's sons are too young and inexperienced to develop the credentials needed to assume leadership and predicted Kim Jong-il would reach outside his family for a successor. A senior South Korean diplomat managed to predict both outcomes at the same time, saying Kim would install one of his sons as a figurehead leader while real political power would lie elsewhere. There was also no consensus on the timing of the succession, with some of our contacts emphasizing that Kim Jong-il's advancing age mandated rapid moves toward designating a successor, while others believed the DPRK would need to secure a more favorable security environment for the regime and improve the nation's abysmal economic conditions before any serious discussion on succession could take place. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) A flurry of recent South Korean and foreign reports have speculated that North Korea was signaling its leader, Kim Jong-il, would soon name his successor. Poloff engaged the following Embassy contacts over the past few weeks to discuss these reports and solicit their views on the succession issue:

- Dr. Choi Jin-wook, Senior Research Fellow, Korea Institute of National Unification (KINU);
- Dr. Chon Hyun-Joon, Senior Research Fellow and Planning and Coordination Division Director, KINU;
- Dr. Cho Myungchul, Head of the Office of International Cooperation for Korean Unification, Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP);
- Dr. Lee Sang Hyun, Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asian Security, Sejong Institute;
- Dr. Koh Yu-hwan, Professor of North Korean Studies, Dongguk

University; and

- Dr. Ryoo Kihl-Jae, Dean of Academic Affairs, College of North Korean Studies, Kyungnam University.

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VIEWS DIVIDED ON "WHEN" AND "WHO"

13. (SBU) The South Korean academics were sharply divided on the questions of who would succeed Kim Jong-il and when the DPRK would announce the successor. Half thought KJI's second son, Kim Jong-chol, was the most likely heir, while the other half were split among those who believed KJI would choose as his successor one of his other two sons or a well-qualified technocrat who was not related to the Kim family. They also diverged in their views on the timing of announcing a successor, from as early as next year to a non-specific point in the future when, after the DPRK presumably resolved many outstanding security and economic issues, KJI would feel more secure about revealing his heir.

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SUCCESSOR COULD BE NAMED AS EARLY AS 2007

14. (SBU) Some of the analysts believed KJI was close to naming a successor and that the announcement could come as early as 2007, timed to the 95th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il Sung on April 15. Dr. Chon Hyun-Joon, Senior Research Fellow at the Korea Institute of National Unification (KINU), observed that:

- KJI was getting old;

- his sons, all relatively young, would need to begin

"preparing" for succession;

- KJI went through a lengthy and arduous process of consolidating his support base before and after being named successor to his father, as well as before and after his father's death; and,

- the DPRK tended to mark special anniversaries (such as the 95th year since Kim Il Sung's birth) with grandiose political events.

Chon concluded from the totality of these factors that the 95th anniversary of his father's birth would be an appropriate time for KJI to announce his successor, partly because he could not afford to waste any more time in preparing his heir, but also because the imagery of Kim Il Sung during the celebratory events would act as a visual reminder to the masses that the Kim family legacy should live on.

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"SIGNS" FROM PYONGYANG

15. (SBU) Dr. Lee Sang Hyun, Senior Research Fellow at Sejong Institute, opined that it could take ten years or more for any of KJI's sons to build up the credentials necessary to garner the political support from high-ranking party and military officials that would be required to be viable as a successor. Since KJI was 64, even if he were to begin the succession process immediately, he would be in his mid-to-late 70s by the time his son established his credentials. These factors all argued in favor of rapid moves to establish a successor.

16. (SBU) In fact, Lee argued, there were indications from Pyongyang that preparations for the succession had already begun. First, a personality cult had formed in 2002 around KJI's third mistress, Ko Young-hee, who was the mother of KJI's second and third sons (Kim Jong-chol and Kim Jong-un). This was reminiscent of the deification of KJI's mother, Kim Jong-suk, shortly before Kim Il Sung named KJI his successor, Lee said. Second, KJI removed his brother-in-law, Chang Song-taek, and Chang's close aides from their offices in the

KWP and the military in 2004. Chang was not seen in public until January 2006, when he reportedly assumed a different position in the KWP but with far less authority than before. Lee said this was KJI's clear warning to Chang -- widely thought to have been the second most powerful figure in DPRK politics until his purge -- to stay out of the succession issue. Third, the DPRK's 2006 New Year's joint editorial and other forms of official propaganda made repeated references to "the third and fourth generations of the revolution," possibly hinting that preparations for succession would begin in 2006. Finally, KJI had replaced many KWP and cabinet "elders" from the Kim Il Sung era with younger officials, beginning with Pak Pong Ju as Premier in 2003; these younger officials would presumably be more welcoming to a younger heir than would their older colleagues.

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BAD TIMING: KJI WANTS BETTER SECURITY AND ECONOMY FIRST

17. (SBU) Most of the scholars, however, believed that available evidence of a succession process was still inconclusive. Dr. Koh Yoo-hwan, Professor of North Korean Studies at Dongguk University, was skeptical that KJI or his confidantes would be in the right frame of mind to contemplate succession, given the DPRK's urgent security and economic concerns. Noting reports that KJI had effectively wrested most real political power from his father years before Kim Il-sung's death, Koh added that KJI would be acutely aware of the potential for political realignment if he were to announce his successor prematurely. Before he would risk becoming a lame duck, KJI would want to ensure that DPRK economic conditions improved and the nation's security concerns were resolved through the lifting of U.S. economic sanctions, removal from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, advances in U.S.-DPRK relations, and normalization with Japan. Given the current stalemate in the Six Party process, real movement toward naming a successor

was therefore highly unlikely.

18. (SBU) Similarly, Dr. Choi Jin-wook, Senior Research Fellow at KINU, asserted that the DPRK did not appear to be preparing for a successor. He cautioned that most observers predicting a 2007 succession based their argument on some generous assumptions, rather than on solid evidence. Indeed, given the uniqueness of its political structure, Choi expressed doubt that the DPRK even had any specific long-term plan on succession. KJI maintained a constant vigil against any attempts by officials to challenge his authority under the guise of supporting his heir. An example of Kim's extreme paranoia about insubordination, Choi said, was KJI's practice of delegating responsibility for all key cabinet ministries and KWP departments to his cronies as first vice ministers and vice directors. These officials all reported directly to KJI, sidestepping the ministers and directors, who were elder party officials kept in place primarily as figureheads. This system of close monitoring by KJI effectively prevented anybody from even mentioning succession without risking retribution. Moreover, KJI's reported order in December banning all discussion on succession was a clear indication that only he would select his heir, and that he would do so at a time of his choosing.

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SON NUMBER TWO?

19. (SBU) Four of the six academics we consulted thought KJI would choose his successor from among his three sons, with three of the four picking 24-year-old Kim Jong-chol, KJI's second son and the eldest of Koh Young-hee's children, as the heir apparent. Sejong Institute's Lee asserted that a combination of factors made Kim Jong-chol the favorite, despite the presence of an older half-brother, Kim Jong-nam. The reports of a personality cult forming around Koh Young-hee, Kim Jong-chol's mother, as well as his positions in the KWP Organization and Guidance Department and the Propaganda and Agitation Department -- both offices in which KJI had begun his own career before being named successor --

were strong evidence that Kim Jong-chol would succeed KJI. If accurate, recent reports that Kim Jong-chol's picture was displayed along with KJI's in party officials' offices, that he accompanied KJI to China during his January visit to China, and that the young Kim visited and laid flowers before the grave of Kim Jong-suk, KJI's mother, would further support the argument that he would succeed KJI, Lee said.

¶10. (SBU) Dr. Ryoo Kihl-Jae of Kyungnam University's College of North Korean Studies echoed Lee's analysis. Noting that Korean tradition typically favored the eldest son in matters of family inheritance, Ryoo argued that KJI's first son, Kim Jong-nam, was effectively put out of the running when he was deported from Japan in 2001 for traveling on a falsified Dominican Republic passport. Even without the fiasco in Japan, however, the fact that his mother, Song Hye-rim, had ended her relationship with KJI on a bad note was already a disadvantage for Kim Jong-nam, Ryoo argued.

PERHAPS EVEN SON NUMBER THREE

¶11. (SBU) Despite Kim Jong-chol's clear advantages, KJI's third son, the 21-year-old Kim Jong-un, ought not be dismissed, asserted KINU's Chon Hyun-joon. A number of observers, such as KJI's former Japanese chef Kenji Fujimoto, asserted that KJI showed greater affection for Kim Jong-un than for his other children. Fujimoto wrote in his memoirs that KJI adored Kim Jong-un for resembling himself, both in image and in personality. KJI thought Kim Jong-chol, in contrast, was "too effeminate" to be a strong leader. In fact, noted Chon, Kim Jong-chol might have problems with the levels of estrogen in his system, as recent reports indicated that he exhibited female secondary sex characteristics. This would seriously impede his chances of succeeding KJI, who would frown upon any "unmasculine" characteristics from someone whom he would trust to continue his military-first policy.

FORMER DPRK ACADEMIC ALSO PREDICTS DYNASTIC SUCCESSION

¶12. (SBU) Dr. Cho Myungchul of the Korea Institute for International Economic Research, a former professor of economics from North Korea's Kim Il Sung University who defected to the ROK in 1994, said that in the DPRK's cultural and political context, the successor to KJI would undoubtedly come from among his sons. The entire Kim family was idolized in the North, meaning that the people of North Korea automatically revered all offspring of Kim lineage. It naturally followed that officials would be able to rally support immediately for a son of KJI if he were to assume a high-profile position. The only real question was which son KJI would choose.

¶13. (SBU) Cho argued that a second reason why succession had to take place within the family was the history of succession in the former Soviet Union, which demonstrated that non-dynastic succession resulted in severe criticism of former leaders by their successors. KJI, who had every interest in ensuring that both his accomplishments and his idolization remain untouched after his passing, had no choice but to choose from among his offspring.

FIRST TO GRAB OFFICE, WAVE FATHER'S FLAG WINS THE CROWN

¶14. (SBU) Cho, based on his experience living among the DPRK elite (his father was former Construction Minister Cho Chul Jun), believed that whichever son was the first to consolidate his position and display absolute loyalty to his father would become KJI's heir. Having attended school with KJI's half-brothers for years, Cho recalled from his school days that, up until high school, Kim Il Sung heavily favored KJI's half-brother Kim Pyong-il as successor. Kim Song-ae, second wife to Kim Il Sung and Kim Pyong-il's mother, even arranged to have Kim Pyong-il, who was 13 years younger than

KJI, begin government work early by shortening his primary and secondary school education from 12 years to a total of 11, and allowing early graduation from KIS University. By the time Kim Pyong-il graduated, however, KJI had already seized control of all key areas and convinced his father that he was the only one fit to succeed him.

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OR PERHAPS A TECHNOCRAT

¶15. (SBU) Choi Jin-wook of KINU argued that another generation of dynastic succession was unlikely, as KJI's children probably did not have the ability to grapple successfully with the current challenges before the DPRK, as well as those that would arise with the resolution of the nuclear issue and improved economic conditions. The sons would not have sufficient time to develop the ability to manage large-scale changes in the DPRK. The ideal candidate would therefore ascend from the ranks of the military, the cabinet or the KWP. He would also need to have demonstrated absolute loyalty to Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong-il, and their legacy for the DPRK.

¶16. (SBU) Koh Yoo-hwan of Dongguk University likewise believed that KJI's successor would be a technocrat with well-established credentials. Noting that KJI wrote extensively on his "successor theory" in the years leading up to his own ascension, Koh stressed that KJI's own writings provided the best indication of the ideal qualities for his successor. KJI expected his successor to have demonstrated absolute loyalty to himself and to the workers' revolution. The successor needed to demonstrate leadership and strong ethics, a thorough knowledge of both Kim Il Sung's and KJI's ideology, and a full grasp of both international and domestic affairs. He also had to enjoy absolute confidence from the public through real achievements. Under such criteria, KJI's sons were probably not viable candidates. For example, most, if not all of the sons had studied in the West, allowing critics to argue that they were "ideologically impure." Furthermore, Koh argued, no official DPRK publication had ever declared the need for dynastic succession.

¶17. (SBU) Both Choi and Koh acknowledged that it was far more difficult to identify potential candidates to succeed KJI among technocrats than among his sons. No DPRK official was sufficiently visible at the moment. They noted, however, the rapid rise of an official named Paek Se-bong, a mysterious individual who seemingly appeared out of nowhere to become a member of the National Defense Commission in 2003, bypassing a number of senior military and KWP officials. The academics speculated that Paek Se-bong could be the pseudonym of somebody being groomed by KJI to succeed him. (NOTE: Paek need not be a technocrat; some observers have suggested Paek is a pseudonym for one of Kim's sons. END NOTE.)

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THE JAPAN MODEL

¶18. (SBU) A former National Security Advisor predicted to us several months ago that the DPRK would resolve the succession issue by adopting the "Japan model" of an imperial family acting as head of state, while real political power lay elsewhere. Under this hypothesis, KJI would install one of his sons as a figurehead leader, thereby securing the legitimacy of the regime in the eyes of the people, ensuring the well-being of his children, and protecting his own legacy. Recognizing that none of his sons were equipped to run the country, however, KJI would put one or more technocrats in charge of the government. Like the Japanese Imperial Family, the Kim family would reign but not rule. Cho Myung-chul, however, did not believe such a system was viable for the DPRK, as it would contradict KJI's own writings on both party ideology and succession theory.

VERSHBOW